

XIII.—*Note on the Migration of the Snowy Owl, Surnia nyctea, Dum.* By W. M. THOMPSON, Esq., Vice-President of the Natural History Society of Belfast.

I HAVE the pleasure on this occasion of recording a novel and interesting fact in the history of that beautiful bird, the Snowy Owl. By the ship 'John and Robert' (Captain McKechnie), of 501 tons burden, belonging to the port of Belfast, and which arrived here from Quebec early in the month of December last, three specimens of this bird, which had been caught on board, were brought hither alive. A fourth individual, similarly obtained, died about the time the vessel entered Belfast bay.

These birds were captured either at twilight or when dark, as they perched on the rigging; the sailors observing that they were asleep before attempting to lay hold of them. They were kept on flesh-meat, which, for the first ten days, was forced down their throats, but after this time they fed themselves; in about fifteen days after their capture the vessel came into port. These three birds, of which two are males and the other a female, are very fine examples of the *Surnia nyctea*; a more splendid specimen than the last-mentioned, which died and is now in my possession, I have not seen. All of them I should consider birds of the year, and from the one that died having been described to me as similar to mine, it probably was so likewise*.

Having heard that these were part of a large "flight" of Snowy Owls that were for several days seen about the vessel, I—never having read any account of this species being met with on its migration—made the fullest inquiry into the subject. The captain obligingly replied to all my queries, and besides furnished me with the log-book of the ship.

It may in the first place be desirable to give an extract from the 'log' for a week previous to their occurrence, that we may learn if the state of the wind, &c., will account for the

* See remarks on this subject in the 1st vol. of 'Annals', p. 243. Two of the Snowy Owls there noticed, which have since been kept in a spacious garden containing many fruit trees, never perch upon them, but remain constantly on the ground, although in rainy weather a portion of their snow-white plumage is thereby much soiled, greatly to the disadvantage of their appearance.

great number of these birds observed in the course of their migration. The vessel, which was bound from Quebec to Belfast, was driven by contrary winds along the coast of Labrador.

1838.

- Nov. 8. Wind W.N.W. at noon; strong gales and tremendous sea running. N.W. at midnight, and more moderate.
- 9. Wind W. by N. at 10 A.M.; weather hazy. At 5 P.M. strong gale from E.; bore up for the harbour of Labrador; here we lay for the next 48 hours. On the 10th were strong gales from the E. On the 11th strong gales from the S.
- 12. Wind N. by E., moderate; left harbour of Labrador this day; light breezes and clear weather.
- 13. Wind N.; going along shore passed Bellisle.
- 14. Wind E. by N. at noon; light airs; cloudy weather; sun obscure.
- 15. Wind S. by E. at noon; sun obscure; strong gales from the S.
- 16. Wind S.S.W., light airs, clear weather; saw Owls* to the number of about thirty or forty for the first time. Lat. 54°02; long. 47°40; about 250 miles from the straits of Bellisle.
- 17. Wind S.S.W., fresh breezes; a few Owls alighted on masts; two captured this evening about 7 o'clock. Lat. 54°20; long. 46°20; about 375 miles from Bellisle.
- 18. Wind S.W.; strong breeze and heavy sea from the E.; great numbers of Owls, about fifty or sixty, flying about and alighting on the rigging; captured none to-day, nor did any remain on the ship this night. Lat. 54°50; 450 miles from Bellisle.
- 19. Wind N.W., strong breeze and cloudy weather; squally with snow showers during the day; captured two more Owls to-night. Lat. 54°51; long. 37°39; about 635 miles from Bellisle.
- 20. Wind N. by E., heavy gales with a tremendous sea running; saw several owls, but none were caught. Lat. 54°50; long 33°10.
- 21. Wind N.E. at 2 P.M., E. by S. at 4 P.M.; light breezes and cloudy weather; saw a Gannet and Curlew. Lat. 54°25; long. 31°40; about 740 miles from Bellisle.

* Notices of the Owls are added to the 'log', which is otherwise much condensed.

Nov. 22. Wind S.E. by S., light breezes ; no Owls seen these two days past, nor were any afterwards met with.

Dec. 4. Vessel arrived at Belfast.

The captain describes the migration of these Owls to have been an extremely beautiful sight, and more particularly, from his never having seen such birds before, was greatly interested about them. Sometimes they kept flying about the vessel without alighting, and again there would be one or two on every yard-arm, with others hovering just above ; on alighting, they fell asleep, apparently from exhaustion. Numerous as were these beautiful creatures, it was only when occasional bickerings took place among those which had alighted on the yard-arms, and in the stillness of night, that they were heard during their entire presence. Their flight, described to me as inaudible, could not but call to mind the finest and most poetical description of this characteristic trait applied to the owls generally, "How serenely beautiful their noiseless flight! A flake of snow is not winnowed through the air more softly silent!*" Occasionally they remained for a day about the ship, when but little way was made, and again, as reported to me, "went off for a day and returned next morning," greatly to the surprise of the beholders how they could find the ship after a night had intervened. What must have added much additional interest to their appearance, was the idea entertained, that these birds blown from the coast of Labrador, and finding, like the dove of old, "no rest for the sole of her foot," had, after traversing the pathless waters, sought the vessel for this purpose, loitering about her course, disappearing for a day, and again hastening to repose upon her yards and rigging. But however pleasing such imaginings, it is not for the naturalist here to pause, but in search of TRUTH, assuredly not less attractive, to pursue inquiry further.

If by reason of storms or otherwise he cannot perceive why the same birds should, after having rested on and left the vessel, re-appear another day, he may perhaps conclude, that the Owls thus seen, were bodies successively migrating to more southern latitudes, and that different birds appeared on each occasion, or at all events that it was not the same individuals which presented themselves during the whole period.

* Blackwood's Magazine, vol. xx. (1826) p. 671.

That the chief abode of the Snowy Owl is the regions within the arctic circle, is well known, as it likewise is that numbers migrate thence in winter to Canada and the United States. Reference to the 'log' will show that, during the five days on which these birds were successively observed, the vessel kept nearly to the 54th degree of latitude, having sailed during the time about 500 miles in an easterly direction; consequently, if the course of the Owls were to Canada or the States, the vessel, which in such event might possibly "fall in with" them a second time, was proceeding somewhat in an opposite direction, but whither again it does not appear that they would have been driven by storms. A greater number of birds too being seen on the 18th than on the 16th favours the idea of a continuous migration.

The vessel was about 250 miles from the straits of Bellisle, or the S.E. point of Labrador, when these Owls first appeared, but sailing eastward, was on the day they were last seen about 740 miles distant from them and 480 miles from the southern extremity of Greenland, which for some time was the nearest land.

I shall take this opportunity of again noticing the occurrence of the Snowy Owl in Ireland. In the possession of Edward Waller, Esq., of Dublin, I lately saw a fine specimen, which was shot in the winter, "about three years ago," near Omagh in the county of Tyrone. This individual may probably have migrated thither early in the year 1835, when several others were obtained in different parts of Ireland; and at which period the species was first recorded as visiting the country*. In a letter, dated Twizell House, July 21, 1838, I was informed by P. J. Selby, Esq., that he had received a Snowy Owl from Killibegs, county of Donegal, near which place it was shot in the month of November or December, 1837 †. This is the same individual which appears from the 'First Annual Report of the Natural History Society of Dublin,' p. 6, to have been announced at one of the meetings as an Eagle Owl (*Bubo maximus*); it is almost unnecessary to add the fact, that the gentleman who made the announcement had not the opportunity of seeing the specimen, but judged merely from the description communicated to him.

* See 'Magazine of Zoology and Botany', vol. ii. p. 179.

† In the first volume of the 'Annals' (p. 241) a Snowy Owl is noticed as having been killed near Belfast on the 2nd of December, 1837.